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THIS NATIVE TRIBE IS REINTRODUCING A DISAPPEARED SPECIES ON ITS OWN LAND

And the federal government can't do much about it.

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I am admiring a stuffed gray wolf and other taxidermy displays in the imposing new headquarters of the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation in Washington state when Richard Whitney, an affable man with broad shoulders and a single black braid, finally arrives. He shakes my hand. He smiles. He's a little late, he explains, because he was up all night smoking salmon for his daughter's impending wedding in Seattle.

Then he's off again. He grabs telemetry equipment. He snags a spotting scope and some snacks. He leads me to a white Toyota pick-up parked in the sprawling lot, turns the key, hits the gas, and we're on our way, zipping along the Columbia River and climbing high onto a basalt-studded plateau from which one can see the beginnings of the Cascade mountains many miles to the west.

Whitney, a wildlife biologist and reservation resident, is spending the day with me as we travel tribal lands looking for a lovely and elusive animal that had, until recently, been absent from the landscape for a century or more. Like many other indigenous nations across the country, the Colville tribes are ardent defenders of nature and leaders in restoring native wildlife to their territory. Many tribal members see wildlife restoration as a direct expression of their self-determination and sovereignty. Helping pronghorn antelope return to Washington, an achievement more than a decade in the making, is their latest contribution to the cause.

"The way we see it is, any native species that belongs here, that should have been here ... why not bring it [back]?" says Whitney, chatting away behind the wheel. State and federal officials as well as local agricultural interests, he adds, don't have much of a say in the matter. Washington's wildlife authorities are well aware of the tribes' prerogative to do as they please.

"They're a sovereign nation and they're releasing animals on their land," says Rich Harris, a section manager with the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife. "We communicate, we were made aware of [the reintroduction], and we're not objecting to it." But even if the state had objected, he adds, "I don't think it would have mattered."

And so the pronghorn antelope finally came home to the shrub-steppe country of the Colville Reservation in January of 2016. But finding the fleet-footed creatures—the fastest land mammals in North America—is no sure bet. We have a day to achieve our goal, and, on this early August morning, with the truck bouncing and bobbing over washboard roads, we barrel into the backcountry.

Once, before white people were here, 35 million pronghorn rambled across the continent, from northern Mexico to central Canada, confined more or less to the western side of the 100th meridian. Only bison, in their massive millions, outnumbered the antelope. The petite and tawny ungulates made their living on forbs and shrubs and grasses, migrating where the food and the weather were amenable, fearing few predators until the colonizers came and changed everything.

Like so many other species, pronghorn suffered near-extirpation at the hands of European migrants, with their disruptive land-use practices and powerful technologies. Overhunting, competition from livestock, and habitat fragmentation had a catastrophic effect, says John Byers, a University of Idaho biology professor and pronghorn researcher. By the 1920s, there were fewer than 20,000 pronghorn left in the United States. In Washington, they were wiped out completely.

"From our anthropologists and historians, we know there were pronghorn here," says Mike Marchand, chairman of the Colville confederacy, sitting in his small corner office at headquarters. Indeed, paleozoological research suggests that pronghorn were present in consistent though limited numbers in Washington for much of the last 10,000 years. But they have been extirpated for roughly a century. "We don't know the word for antelope," Marchand adds. "That sort of tells you something. It has been a while."

Things turned around in the 20th century. The Boone and Crockett Club (a hunting and conservation organization founded by Teddy Roosevelt) and the National Audubon Society, with support from the White House, established a 500,000-acre federal antelope refuge in northern Nevada in 1936. In the 1960s, the struggling Sonoran subspecies received Endangered Species Preservation Act protection. Since then, conservation efforts, from habitat restoration to hunting restrictions, have continued apace, and there are now an estimated 700,000 pronghorn in the U.S. Populations are particularly robust in Montana, Wyoming, and Nevada.

Despite this rebound, however, antelope were still missing from Washington at the turn of the new millennium. The Colville confederacy was determined to change that.

"I think that is the common philosophy we have," says Marchand, a mellow fellow sporting a Washington Huskies sweatshirt and a Yankees cap. "That our traditions are the ultimate best and whatever we did in the past was probably more pure and good for us as people."

His nation, he says, is trying to bring back what was here before, and what was here were hordes of salmon, plentiful game, and, of course, pronghorn.

Whitney had planned to meet two colleagues in the middle of the high plateau where the antelope live, and from there our group would begin the pursuit in earnest. When we arrive at the rendezvous, however, the other team members are missing. Whitney pulls over, gets on the radio, and soon discovers why: a flat tire thanks to daily beatings from the rugged roads.

We find the others at the edge of an open expanse of prairie grass and bitterbrush. As we wait for biologist Eric Krausz to jack up the truck and replace the tire, Whitney scans the land with binoculars.

There is no sign of them. In the parched grass, the tan antelope blend in as surely as anonymous pedestrians in any metropolis. Their acute vision and a top speed of 60 miles per hour mean they can avoid potential predators, including humans, with relative ease.

As Whitney and his crew can tell you, reintroducing pronghorn to a place they haven't been in a century is a tough undertaking.

In May of 2015, the tribes received permission from the state of Nevada to take 52 pronghorn, transport them to Washington, and release them on the reservation. But first, wildlife staffers had to prepare the ground for the antelopes' arrival: They spent months assessing and improving the quality of potential habitat on tribal lands, reforming grazing practices, and removing barbed-wire fences, which can do deadly damage to the species. Then the day came to close the deal.

In late January of 2016, as antelope scattered and fled before the staccato thwack of a chopper flying low above the Nevada plains, a gunner leaned out and shot projectile nets at them. One by one they were trapped, hauled to a staging ground, collared, and made as comfortable as possible for the long trip ahead.

Because pronghorn are so energetic, they can fatally overheat when handled or confined. With this in mind, Whitney and his crew had selected the coldest time of the year to conduct the operation. The team had horse trailers at the ready when the captured pronghorn were brought in from the field. They loaded them up as quickly as possible and immediately began the 14-hour drive from Nevada to Colville.

"It was crazy," Whitney says. "We threw them in the trailers and as soon as a trailer would get full we would get on the road." The crew drove in pairs, non-stop, with only brief breaks to fill up the gas tank or hit the bathroom.

After arriving on the reservation, and with little further handling, the pronghorn were released back into the Washington wilds. Tribal members wanted to be out on the plateau the next day to see their new neighbors, but they were told to give the pronghorn space to acclimate to their adoptive home. As it turned out, even without disruptions from human admirers, the ungulates struggled—and many failed—to survive.

Officials in Washington tried three times in the early 20th century to reintroduce pronghorn. Three times they failed.

Only the tribes have succeeded. First to pull it off was the Yakama Nation, in central Washington, which in 2011 restored antelope to its reservation after seeking early encouragement from the Colville program. Ultimately the Colvilles required a few additional years to bring their own initiative to fruition.

In the beginning, things were rocky. At least 14 of the 52 Colville antelope died their first winter, most suffering from stress and shock. The rest survived and, eventually, thrived. Some managed to have babies that spring. A small group even ventured beyond the reservation, swimming across the Columbia to try its luck among the farming settlements on the far side.

For Whitney, it was sweet consolation to see the pronghorn colonizing other lands.

"I don't know if that is desirable for the state of Washington or not, but for us, we are about restoring the species to the state," he says. The tribes plan to reintroduce an additional 50 antelope to the reservation this year.

Restoring ecological relationships; reviving the species' cultural significance; even hunting the antelope someday—that, Whitney says, is the tribes' vision. In our time of indigenous-led protests against fossil-fuel development and environmental destruction, the restoration of native wildlife is another strategy that First Peoples are deploying to help heal this continent.

Eric Krausz's truck rumbles fast in front of us as a technician leans out the passenger window holding a telemetry antenna, hoping to hear signals emitted from the radio collars of our quarry. As their vehicle kicks up dry dust, Whitney and I fall a bit behind. Then way behind. Then the other truck is out of sight altogether.

Then they appear—so suddenly that it takes us a second to slow down. Nine antelope—small and lithe, with alien eyes—burst from a dense lakeside thicket. They are less than a hundred feet from us but, for some reason, they reduce their speed. They stop. They stand still, silhouetted against the surrounding shrub-steppe. Some of them hide behind a hill, only their ears and eyes poking above, like scouts surveying a battlefield. Two little fawns as cute as hay-colored colts stand on skinny legs. They stare at us and we stare back.

Then, with their perfect camouflage on full display, they melt away.

"Oh, man. That was ... it doesn't get any better than that," Whitney says, smiling widely, shocked at our proximity to the skittish speedsters. "That was ridiculous."

We quickly climb into the truck and circle back to see if we can manage a second sighting. But when we come around the hill, we can't find them. The antelope offered us one quick glimpse, left us giddy, and were gone.